

The Macomb Daily

Macomb closer to nation's new 'Arsenal of Democracy'

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The symmetry between the defense industry and the auto industry -- those cross-connected niche skills in engineering and design and machining and advanced manufacturing -- may be what leads Macomb County back to the path of prosperity. Based on some new developments, making Macomb the 21st Century version of the nation's "Arsenal of Democracy" is well within our reach.

County Executive Mark Hackel took the initiative in February when he announced the creation of a task force to push Macomb's dominance in the defense industry to new heights. That declaration came as officials began to appreciate new research that shows Macomb County defense contracts represent a \$24 billion-a-year boost to the local economy.

The fact that Macomb accounts for nearly two-thirds of all Pentagon business in Michigan makes us the defense capital of the entire Midwest. What's more, Macomb has tripled its defense contracts since 2000, with the financial benefits enjoyed by thousands of firms. Hackel has immodestly projected that our county could become the defense capital of the world.

In pursuing that goal, Macomb has made some significant gains in recent days.

First, Macomb Community College announced the other day that it has received a \$428,000 grant to enhance the development of the defense industry in the county. The college had previously landed a \$5 million federal grant to retrain the unemployed, and especially to develop a workforce ready to take on emerging defense industry jobs.

In addition, the task force envisioned by Hackel has taken shape as a small working group, consisting of heavy hitters representing: MCC, Macomb County government, Automation Alley, the Macomb-Oakland business incubator, the Michigan chapter of the Association of the United States Army, Selfridge Air National Guard Base, the Michigan Economic Development Corporation, the U.S. Army Tank-Automotive Command complex, and two key defense contractors -- BAE Systems and General Dynamics Land Systems.

Chaired by MCC Provost and VP James Sawyer, the group will meet monthly to identify, prioritize and develop strategies designed to position the southeast Michigan defense sector for growth. The task force convened for the first time late last week.

Second, BMT Aerospace of Fraser, one of the new kids on the block, has a hand in manufacturing parts for the Black Hawk helicopters that were instrumental in the U.S. commando raid that resulted in the killing of Osama bin Laden. It's unclear whether BMT's products are incorporated into the secret stealth copters that were used in the special ops raid – new technology that is all the buzz on web sites populated by aviation and military enthusiasts – but their association with the celebrated covert mission cannot hurt.

Meanwhile, BMT is investing more than \$5 million into its Fraser plant, thanks to a city tax break, that will allow the firm to invest in new state-of-the-art grinding and milling equipment. So far, the company has posted record earnings this year, and every year, since 2005.

Third, Congress is attempting to revive the EFV amphibious assault vehicle for the Marines. Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced in January that the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle project was getting the ax due to decades of underperformance. But some in Congress are now weighing in.

When Gates made his budget-cutting announcement, many analysts pointed out that this project was never embraced by the Pentagon. But news reports quickly pointed out that cancellation of the \$14 billion EFV program would mean immediate layoffs of dozens of engineers at General Dynamics' Sterling Heights site, and the impact on Detroit area parts suppliers would mean the loss of up to 5,000 jobs and a \$2 billion hit to the Michigan economy.

But on Thursday the Seapower Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee voted for legislation that would bar the Pentagon from terminating the project until Gates submits a detailed report outlining the Marine Corps' requirement for an amphibious assault vehicle and comparing the costs and capabilities of the EFV to various alternatives.

All of these developments mean that the Macomb County economy could soon be firing on all cylinders – and not just in the production of cars for the highway but in the development of military vehicles that can handle all the desert dust and mountainous terrain and sea-tossed beaches that our armed forces' mission overseas requires.

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